

# The Weasel in Religion, Myth and Superstition

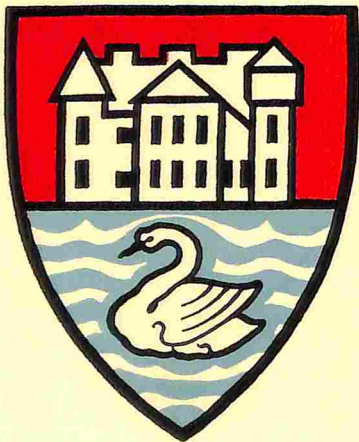
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By THOMAS SHEARER DUNCAN

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Reprinted from WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY STUDIES  
Vol. XII, Humanistic Series, No. 1, pp. 33-66, 1924

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## THE WEASEL IN RELIGION, MYTH AND SUPERSTITION

THOMAS SHEARER DUNCAN

*Associate Professor of Greek and Latin*

Though a goodly amount has been done on the part played by the weasel in religion, myth and superstition, it has been done by many persons in a more or less sporadic manner and incidentally, in conjunction with the study of other problems. As there is no single article that makes a complete study of the subject it would seem that such a study might be profitable and necessary. The animal appears in almost countless superstitions that cover a wide area and extend through a long period of time. Even after a fairly comprehensive study of the material one cannot be certain that he has covered the subject—in fact, must feel more than apprehensive that he has not. In trying to determine precisely what rôle the weasel played in superstition, myth and religion its appearance in tales of metamorphosis forms the starting point. This one may be sure is what has started most scholars upon the examination of the whole question. Further, it appears as having prophetic powers, as a soul-animal, as an animal of ill omen and sometimes of good omen. It punishes the breaking of faith given upon oath, is a guardian of treasure, is an apotropaic animal, finds the healing herb, brings good fortune or evil, and is employed in medicine in various ways.

It is scarcely possible within the limits of one article to discuss the subject under all these heads. Something must be left for subsequent treatment. One aspect of the subject, it would seem however, has not received sufficient study, namely, the question as to when, among the ancient Greeks, the weasel came to be regarded as a soul-animal. In the

attempt to answer this, a further question also has suggested itself, whether a study of the etymology of the Greek name for the weasel, γαλῆ, might give any help towards arriving at a conclusion.

#### NAMES FOR THE WEASEL

The rôle of the weasel might be more easily understood if the etymology of the Greek name for it were certain. But the question of the etymology is far from easy. Meyer dismisses it with the observation, "die etymologische Grundlage aber ist nicht klar."<sup>1</sup> The handbooks all give, more or less fully, the names applied to the weasel in more recent times, but only Keller attempts to give the etymological basis of γαλῆ.<sup>2</sup> He considers its root meaning to be "mehrfarbig," but the reasoning by which he arrives at the notion is not convincing. It is in brief: "Edelmarder, Steinmarder, Wiesel und Iltis haben alle die durch das wort γαλῆ "mehrfarbig" etymologisch ausgedrückte Eigenschaft: sie alle sind auf der oberen Seite dunkler, auf der anderen hell gefärbt. Diese Mehrfarbigkeit ist die Urbedeutung von γαλῆ." If "Mehrfarbigkeit" were the only common characteristic of these animals there would be a greater likelihood of truth in the conclusion. That the word γαλῆ became a generic term for the small animals related to the weasel and for the cat is not disputed, but this fact proves nothing about the significance of the stem in the word γαλῆ. Boisacq compares the Sanskrit "giriḥ" (Fr. souris) and the Latin "glis, gliris" (Fr. loir).<sup>3</sup> He further draws attention to the generic use of the term by pointing out that 'galea', the borrowed Latin word, signifies a helmet of leather. Whatever the original signification of the root, however, it seems to denote small animals that burrow in the ground. The

<sup>1</sup> *Handbuch der griech. Etym.*, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> *Die antike Tierwelt*, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionnaire de la langue grecque.*



attempts at derivation made by Placzec produce more tangible results.<sup>4</sup> His note on the names of the weasel among Semitic nations may be quoted at length. He says: "The Semitic nations knew and employed the weasel long before the cat. In Lev. 11, 29 we meet with 'choled' (Targum of Onkelos, 'chulda'). The paraphrase of Jonathan ben Uzziel renders the Hebrew by 'Kerkushta': The Septuagint has γαλή, and Rashi 'mustela'. In Hebrew, especially, in concurrence with Psalms 49, 20, and 17, 14, 'choled' signifies 'the earth' as a terrestrial body. In Syriac and also in the dialect of the Talmud it means 'ditch.' The rabbins use 'chaludah' with reference to a clumsy use of the knife for the slaughter of animals. The knife gets lodged or burrows in the throat instead of making a smooth gash across it. In connection with the meaning of this vocable the weasel would be called 'choled' or 'chulda' because it burrows and lodges in a cavity of the earth. In the Aramaic idioms 'chalad' signifies rust. This term might well be applied to the fur on the back of the weasel. The name of the prophetess Hulda (2 Kings 22, 14: 2 Chron. 34, 22) shows that the little quadruped was familiarly known in the houses of the ancient Hebrews. The following . . . . passages . . . show how the allusions to the weasel were close at hand in domestic matters, in ritual observances and also in ethical and proverbial sayings. The weasel was not solely called 'chulda' but also 'kerkushta' which name too was applied to the prophetess. 'Kerkushta' was probably derived from the Greek κέρκος where it signifies 'tail.' 'Kerkushta' in relation to the weasel may therefore serve to point out the peculiar obtuseness of its tail."<sup>5</sup> Farther on he adds

<sup>4</sup> Placzec, *The Weasel and the Cat in Ancient Times*, Trans. by Lowey, Trans. Bibl. Arch. 1893.

<sup>5</sup> *op. cit.* p. 157 f. Yet the O. T. concordance gives the meaning of 'coled' to be different. It says, "According to its etymology it would denote an animal that slips or glides away." No authorities are cited for the statement.

that the Talmud mentions a peculiar species of weasel, the 'Chuldoth Senaim,' which are explained to be 'Sherza Charsa,' and which he interprets as meaning 'trailing creatures which delve and live in pit-holes.'

It is true that all this leaves something to be desired in the way of clearness and positiveness. The Aramaic word 'calad,' meaning 'color of rust,' seems not to be related by Placzec to 'coled'. Yet it becomes fairly clear that in Hebrew the first name of the weasel is 'coled' and that, later, names representing characteristics of physical make-up or habit, 'Kerkushta' and 'Sherza Charsa,' are added. Further it is shown that the root in 'coled' means to burrow and that the weasel is so called from its habit of burrowing in the earth.<sup>6</sup> The roots of the words γαλῆ and 'coled' give the appearance of being akin, but kinship between them is hardly possible.

Naturally, μυοθήρας, 'mouse-hunter,' was a common name, but this was quickly and generally abandoned in favor of more flattering terms.<sup>7</sup>

Suidas gives other names that were applied to the weasel, κερδῶ and ἰλαρία.<sup>8</sup> The latter was no doubt given to it because of its swiftness of movement and playfulness, or perhaps the motive prompting it was fear and the desire to appease the little animal whose vicious character seems to be attested by all who were acquainted with its habits. The former name was due to the association of the weasel with treasure.<sup>9</sup>

How early the word νίμφη was used to denote the weasel is hard to determine. Zielinski thinks it was in early times but does not set even an approximate date.<sup>10</sup> He points

<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.* p. 160.

<sup>7</sup> Keller, *op. cit.* p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> Sub voc. γαλῆ. Keller, *op. cit.* p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> See pp. 43, 47.

<sup>10</sup> *Rh. Mus.* XLIV, 157 ff.



out that the Byzantine scholia to Aristophanes give the name *νυμφίτσα* and makes the deduction that *νύμφη* in ancient Greek meant 'weasel' as well as 'bride.'<sup>11</sup> Boisacq gives it without question, as a name applied to the weasel in early times.

About the etymology of the Latin name 'mustela' there is also some uncertainty. The Forcellini Thesaurus gives—"nomen a *mus*, sive a *mus* et *telum*." It quotes Isidorus, "Mustela dicta, quia *mus longus*: nam *telum* a longitudine dictum."<sup>12</sup> Isidorus' authority is Servius on *Aen.* 9, 747. The following derivatives are given—mustecula, mustelatus, mustelinus. Keller gives a different etymology. According to him 'mustela' is a translation of the Greek *μυοθήρας*, the form being influenced by popular etymology. He says, "Vielleicht dachte man an *mus-dela*=quae mures delet. Es kann aber auch aus *mustera* entstanden sein. Volksetymologische Verwechslung von *r* and *l* werden wir u.a. in *colliandrum* and *gramiae* finden."<sup>13</sup> Yet the root significance of the word was lost soon, as would naturally be expected for, as Keller points out, the name was given to girls, as is attested by a Latin inscription belonging to 392 A.D.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the signification of the word 'mustela' may be, it is certain that later names applied to the weasel were given for other reasons than for its use in the house as a destroyer of mice and a protector against snakes.<sup>15</sup> As early as the fourth century B.C. it was called *νύμφη*, 'bride,' by the Greeks. This name has to do with the part that the weasel played in

<sup>11</sup> Schol. Arist. *Clouds* 169, τὴν νυμφίτσαν ἦν καὶ μυγαλὴν φασί: and *Plut.* 693 γαλῆ ἡ κατά, μυγαλὴ ἡ νυμφίτσα. Du Cange and Legrand both give the word.

<sup>12</sup> *Orig.* 3, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Lateinische Volksetymologie* p. 46: cf. p. 159. Also Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> *op. cit.* p. 165 n. *C. I. L.* x, 5646. *Mustela* hic posita etc.

<sup>15</sup> Keller, *op. cit.* p. 165, "Die romanische Völker. . . ohne Ausnahme das griechische Lehnwort *mustela* (*μυοθήρας*, Mausjäger) fallen liessen und dafür allerlei Zärtlichkeitswörter einsetzten."

mythology, superstition and religious ritual.<sup>16</sup> Later it came to be called *νυμφίτσα*. In Italy its names were 'donnola' (little lady), 'benula' (good little creature), and many others.<sup>17</sup> In Portugal it is called 'doninha' and in Spain 'comadreja.'<sup>18</sup> In Slavonic it is 'lasice' (love or darling), and in the Basque language 'andreigerra' (beautiful lady) 'andereder,' 'anyereijer,' 'anyereyer,' 'anjyar.' Whether the superstition on which these names were based survived among the Basques is rather difficult to determine. It is called 'satandera' (Basque-Guip.), 'satandre' (Ronce. in Lower Navarre), a term which means 'mouse-lady.' Schuchardt thinks that perhaps 'satandre' is to be identified in significance with 'andra.' Anyhow, in all the forms of the name the meaning 'young woman' appears.

The Magyar 'holgy' again signifies 'lady' and 'ermine.' The word for weasel is 'holgy-menyét.' The latter part of which, 'menyét,' means 'bride.' The Georgian word for weasel is 'Königin.' Its Spanish-Arabian name is 'arusat al firān,' that is 'bride of the mice.' The Spanish-Basque name of the weasel is 'erbinude,' 'erbiunide,' 'nurse of hares.' Whether the explanation of Riegler (*Wörter und Sachen* II, 186 ff.) is correct may be disputed. According to him it is called so in irony because the weasel springs on hares and sucks their blood. The Galician name is 'garridina' (from 'garrido' = beautiful).<sup>19</sup> In Westphalia it was called 'froie' (woman, maiden).<sup>20</sup> The name 'fairy' is given to it at Polperro in Cornwall and in ancient English.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See p. 39, 40, 47.

<sup>17</sup> On Italian names for the weasel see Flecchia, *Pastille etimologique* (Archivo Glottol. vol. 1, pp. 46-52), cited by Rolland, *Faune Populaire* VII, p. 121. Also Hehn, *Kulturpflanzen und Haustiere* p. 488.

<sup>18</sup> Körting, *Lateinisch—romanisches Wörterbuch*.

<sup>19</sup> Schuchardt, *Zeitschr. f. roman. Philol.* Placzec, *op. cit.* p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, I, p. 254. See also III, 324.

<sup>21</sup> *Notes and Queries*, First Series, Vol. X, p. 300.



The French names for the weasel are rather numerous. 'Mustela' is preserved in various forms, as 'moustela,' 'moustella,' 'moustelo,' 'mostela.'<sup>22</sup> Whether the root signification of the word is lost in each case one cannot be sure. The names cited are local and are far less common than 'belette.' Rolland says of 'belette' and its parallels, "A cause de sa propreté, de la gracieuseté et de la mignardise de ses formes et aussi à cause des vertus bienfaisantes que la legende lui attribue, on l' a appelée la belle, la jolie." Other variants are 'bele' (old French), 'blette,' 'beleto,' 'belto,' 'balotte,' 'bero-ga,' 'poulido.'<sup>23</sup> Then it receives a name taken from 'marcou' the word for a male cat and is called 'marcolle,' 'margolatte' 'barcolle,' 'bas-coule' etc. Other names are 'loutre' (from medieval Latin, lutrus, lustrus, lutricius),<sup>24</sup> 'putois' (lat. putorius), corrupted into 'fussio' and 'ficheou';<sup>25</sup> 'fouine' (med. lat. fagine, DuCange), corrupted into fáy-no;<sup>26</sup> 'martre';<sup>27</sup> 'zibeline' (med. lat. Du Cange 'sabelus'); 'herminea' (med. lat. DuCange, 'mus armillinum), a name also given to fairies; and 'furet' (med. lat. 'feruncus' and 'forunculus'). In the Pyrenees it is called 'pā-kéza' (lady. Finally, in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Mo'ed Katon* 1, 4, and referring to Psalm 58, 9, the weasel is termed 'ishuth' (little woman).

#### THE WEASEL IN TALES OF METAMORPHOSIS

The discussion of the names of the weasel indicates clearly that wherever found it was associated in some way with a woman or maiden. For a study of the part played by the

<sup>22</sup> Rolland, *Faune Populaire* I, pp. 50 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Rolland, *op. cit.* p. 50.

<sup>24</sup> Id. VII, p. 126.

<sup>25</sup> Id. p. 130. Id. p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> For 'martre' and its synonyms see Th. Braune (*Zeitschrift f. roman. Philol.* 1897, p. 127) and Schrader, (*Reallexikon d. indogerm. Alterthumsk.* pp. 954-956), cited by Rolland, *op. cit.* VII, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Rolland, *op. cit.* VII, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> Placzec, *op. cit.* p. 164.

weasel in superstition and religion this fact is of utmost importance. That the association of the weasel with a woman appears in the names of so many places scattered over such a wide area would argue for a very early origin of that association. Just how the association was made and how the other attributes were consequently assigned to the weasel will appear in the progress of this discussion.

We have seen that the name *νύμφη* was applied to it early, perhaps as early as the fifth or fourth century B.C. Just what the beginning of this association was is not easy to say, but Clement of Alexandria, in a passage where he speaks of the animals worshipped by the Egyptians and by some Greek cities, records that the Thebans worshipped the weasel because of the birth of Heracles.<sup>29</sup> The story of a certain Galinthias, told by Antoninus Liberalis presumably following Nicander, has to do with the same tradition.<sup>30</sup> In outline it runs as follows: "In Thebes lived Galinthias daughter of Proetus. This maiden was the playmate and companion of Alcmene, daughter of Alectryon. When Alcmene was about to give birth to Heracles, the Fates and Ilythia, to favor Hera, kept back her delivery. Galinthias, fearing that the excessive pain would craze Alcmene, ran to the Fates and Ilythia and announced that by the will of Zeus a man-child was born to Alcmene. Thereupon amazement seized them and straightway they raised their hands. At once the pains left Alcmene and Heracles was born. The Fates were grieved and took away the maidenhood of Galinthias because, being a mortal, she had deceived the gods. They made her into a weasel and caused her to live in dark places and made her manner of mating ugly. For she conceives through the ears and gives birth by the mouth. . . . Now Hecaté pitied her because of her changed

<sup>29</sup> *Protr.* 2, 29 p. 34 P.

<sup>30</sup> *Anton. Lib.* c. 29.



appearance and made her to be her sacred servant. And when Heracles grew up he remembered her kindness and built a temple for her near his dwelling and brought to it sacrifices. These sacrifices the Thebans still maintain and before the feast of Heracles they sacrifice to Galinthias first."

Other versions of the story present slight differences of detail. Ovid, telling it in his own way, makes Ilythia herself sit upon an altar before the door and exert the spell upon Alcmena.<sup>31</sup> In Antoninus' version it is the Fates who inflict punishment upon Galinthias. Libanius tells it, representing Hera herself as hindering the birth of Heracles and implying that it was Hera who changed Galinthias into a weasel.<sup>32</sup>

For the sake of comparison and to establish a possible relation it is interesting to put beside this story two passages from Aelian. In the first he speaks of the Thebans' worship of the weasel and says that it was the nurse of Heracles, according to tradition. Rather, the truth is, he says, that the weasel aided Alcmena in the birth of Heracles, by running past and loosing the bonds of her pains.<sup>33</sup> Whether Aelian is here hinting that he knows the Galinthias story and is offering a rationalistic explanation of it, one cannot be sure. The part of the weasel in the delivery of Alcmena is thus recorded elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> According to the second passage of Aelian the weasel was once a human being and was called by the name γαλῆ. Further it was transformed into a weasel

<sup>31</sup> Met. 9, 293-323. See vv. 298 ff.: dextroque a poplite laevum pressa genu, digitis inter se pectine iunctis sustinuit nixus, tacita quoque carmina voce dixit.

The manner and effect of this spell is explained in Pliny *N. H.* XXVIII, 6, 17. See also Welcker, *Kl. Schr.* III, 190.

<sup>32</sup> Libanius, *διηγήματα*, 1099 R.

<sup>33</sup> *N. A.* XII, 5: τὴν δὲ γαλῆν παραδραμεῖν καὶ τοὺς τῶν ὠδινῶν λῦσαι δεσμούς καὶ προσελθεῖν τὸν Ἡρακλέα καὶ ἔρπειν ἥδη.

<sup>34</sup> Schol. Townley, *Il.* XIX, 119: γαλῆς δὲ παρελθούσης ἀναλῦσαι (sc. τὰς Μοῖρας) τὰς χεῖρας. The further fact is added that, after the birth of Heracles, the weasel was taken as his nurse. See Welcker, *Kl. Schr.* III, p. 192, n. 17. for fuller references.

by the wrath of Hecaté.<sup>35</sup> Now if there is any relation between these stories noted by Aelian and the myth of Galinthias it is evident that the former represent the myth stripped of its later accretions or in other words that the Galinthias story is the outgrowth of the simpler myth.

One of the fables of Aesop tells the story of the transformation of a weasel into a beautiful girl.<sup>36</sup> A weasel fell in love with a youth and was transformed so that she might marry him. At the marriage feast, when a mouse ran past her couch, she jumped down and pursued it, thus revealing her true nature. The fable is repeated by Babrius.<sup>37</sup>

Stories of transformations such as this are natural only to a people that believed in the transmigration of souls, and it is the only one of its kind in Greek mythology.<sup>38</sup> Keller compares a similar story of the Hindus, told of the mouse instead of the weasel. A mouse was turned into a maiden by a god at the request of a recluse and changed back again into a mouse when she showed her real nature by desiring as husband a mouse, though many others as the moon, sun, clouds and hills were offered.<sup>39</sup> While it is true that no passage may be cited from classical literature to prove that the Greeks conceived of the soul as appearing in the form of a weasel, yet from the Galinthias story the deduction might fairly be drawn that the weasel was considered a soul-animal. This deduction has been drawn by a Russian scholar, W. Klinger, in an article on animals in superstition.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> N. A. 15, 11: οτι ην ανθρωπος ηκουσα . . . και ως ες τοϋτο το ζϋον το κακον ετρεψεν αυτην 'Εκάτης της θεου μηνης.

<sup>36</sup> Aesop (Halm) 88.

<sup>37</sup> Babrius 32.

<sup>38</sup> Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* p. 166.

<sup>39</sup> Keller, *Geschichte der griech. Fabel* p. 344.

<sup>40</sup> W. Klinger, *Zhivotnoe v anticnom i sovremennom sueverii* (*Animals in Classical and Centemporary Superstition*), in *Izvestia of the Kiev University*, 1912.

For the translation of this article and for much other material in modern folklore the writer is indebted to Dr. Archer Taylor of Washington University, Saint Louis.



Klinger, starting with the theory that early in the history of Greek superstition the weasel was considered a soul-animal, maintains that Gruppe did not make the inevitable deductions from the rôle that the weasel played.<sup>41</sup> The latter acknowledges only its demoniacal character. "The evil significance of the weasel in later superstition," says he, "is in all likelihood to be deduced from this, that at first they saw in it a chthonic demon resident in the earth." Klinger maintains further, however, that its bloodthirstiness and thievish character argue for its membership in the class of soul-animals.<sup>42</sup> In substantiation of his theory he points out that, in addition to the rôle of the weasel in legends of metamorphosis, the traits commonly assigned to it are those of the soul-animal. It is an animal of ill omen; it is prophetic, apotropaic; is the guardian of oaths and the keeper of treasure, and aids in child-bearing.

Among the various animals into which magicians transform themselves is the weasel. In Apuleius a witch takes the form of a weasel in order to gain entrance into a room.<sup>43</sup> Here the witch effects her own transformation, but at other times the soul is called forth from one creature to another by the agency of a god. In Aelian's story it is Hecatè who in her wrath changes the woman into a weasel.<sup>44</sup> In the Galinthias story cited above, according to the various versions, different goddesses are active, the Moirae, Ilythia and Hera. As Klinger points out, even Hera is now accepted as having been originally a chthonic deity. According to most recent investigations the name Hera presents a feminine equivalent

<sup>41</sup> Gruppe, *Griech. Myth.* 802, n. 7

<sup>42</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> Met. 2, 25: sic desolatus ad cadaveris solacium . . . animum meum permulcebam cantationibus . . . cum repente introrepens mustela contra me constitit. Cp. c. 22: quippe cum deterrimae versipelles in quodvis animal ore converso latenter arrepant . . . nam et aves et rursum canes et mares, immo vero etiam muscas induant.

<sup>44</sup> N. A. 15. 11.

to ἥρωσ, that is, the 'radiant corpse.'<sup>45</sup> Thus it is seen that the metamorphosis into the weasel is always effected by a chthonic deity. The transformation is, then, equivalent to a transfer to the realm of the dead.

The reverse metamorphosis, that is, the change from the weasel to a woman is recorded in the fable of Aesop, to which, no doubt, Zenobius makes reference in his explanation of the proverb, γαλῆ κροκωτόν.<sup>46</sup> This metamorphosis follows simply and naturally on the condition that in the weasel once was contained a human being. Commenting on this type of transformation Rohde observes that similar stories exist in Asia and America.<sup>47</sup> The features are these: the love of a demoniac creature, living in beast form, for a mortal; the change to mortal form in order that the lover may be near his loved one; the reverse change as soon as some event puts the changed being into such a condition as to make him recall his former habits. Stories such as these, he says, were so well known among the Greeks in the fifth and fourth centuries as to give rise to the proverb.

Two other considerations may tend to corroborate the theory that the weasel was originally conceived as a soul-animal. The first is, according to Klinger, that the weasel is always transformed into a woman and never into a man. The other is that in ancient times the soul is always represented in female form. One might suggest that the fact of the weasel's appearing in the form of a woman may be due to its characteristics which are commonly considered female rather than male. In other words, it may have been generally thought of as a female animal. The characteristics of

<sup>45</sup> I. G. x11, 5, 1, 228: "Ἡραὶς Δήμητρι καὶ Κόρη Πολυκλείδης Μασώ, Τλησιάδης Τιμώ. See Klinger, *op. cit.* p. 180 n. 3, who follows Sam Wide, *Chthonische u. himmlische Götter*, in *Arch. f. Religionswiss.* x (1907) pp. 257-68.

<sup>46</sup> Zenobius 2. 93: γαλῆ κατὰ πρόνοιαν Ἀφροδίτης γυνὴ γενομένη ἐν χιτῶνι κροκωτῶ οὔσα ἐπέδραμε μύτ. Cf. Diogenian, 3.82.

<sup>47</sup> *Rh. Mus.* XLIII, 304 ff.



the cat, for instance, are those chiefly of the female. In the second place, while it is true that, in Greek art, representations of the soul are female, the fact may be due to the imperfection of tradition. Certainly in modern folk-lore the soul takes many forms, and sometimes that of a man. In Celtic folk-lore is a story of a party of reapers who at noonday lay down to rest. One man fell asleep and as he slept he had his mouth open and breathed very loudly. Presently the others saw a little black man, or something like a monkey, come out of his mouth and start on a walk around the field.<sup>48</sup>

The position has been taken, however, that there is no necessary connection between the Galinthias story and the weasel. Ahrens relates the name Galinthias to γάλινθοι, γέρινθοι with the explanation by Hesychius as ἐρέβινθοι, ὄροβοι, the chick-pea used in purifications. Hecatē is a purifying goddess.<sup>49</sup> The theory of Maas is that the relating of the story to the weasel rests on a false popular etymology. Galé, he says, is the hypocoristic term for both Galinthias and Galanthis, the names given by Antoninus Liberalis and Ovid respectively to the nurse of Heracles, and its agreement in form with γαλή is accidental.<sup>50</sup> The theory of Ahrens does not rest on any firm basis of reason. In the first place, it offers no explanation of the motive in the story. But Ahrens was concerned with explaining the name of the month Γαλινθίων. In the second place, the etymological similarity between γαλή and γάλινθοι may be purely accidental. Maas' theory has more in its favor. Yet it does not take sufficiently into account the fact that very early there was a cult of the weasel at Thebes. It is true that popular etymology at times has had a striking influence on

<sup>48</sup> Rhys. *Celtic Folk-lore*, 602-3.

<sup>49</sup> *Rh. Mus.* XVII, 356.

<sup>50</sup> *Hermes* XXIII, 614.

ceremonial. Klinger gives an illustration of this fact.<sup>51</sup> He thinks, however, that, because of the well-known inclination of the Greeks to anthropomorphism, in the rare instances of the cult of animals which have come down it is more natural to see "the legacy of gray, prehistoric antiquity." This is no proof of the proposition, but is perhaps all that can be offered where important links in the chain of tradition seem to be lost. Rohde, as has been seen, cites a Hindu parallel for the reverse metamorphosis of a weasel into a maiden.<sup>52</sup> Zielinski adds to Rohde's evidence that of the later Greek names for the weasel, *νύμφη* and *νυμφίτσα*.<sup>53</sup> Riess gives his support in an article on Artemidorus 3, 28.<sup>54</sup>

Now while it is true that one cannot choose one from among all these conflicting opinions and demonstrate its correctness, one may point out what seems to be probable. To repeat, to the ancient Greeks the soul appeared in the form of a woman. The weasel, from its habit of burrowing in the ground, would early be associated with the world of the dead, hence would readily be regarded as a soul-animal. Such a story as the Galinthias story would naturally grow up to make the association more definite. It would then be given the attributes of the soul-animal which are cited above. It is scarcely possible to say otherwise when and how attributes were given to it. Böttiger thinks, for example, that the weasel came to be thought of as a *σύμβολον ἐνόδιον* from its running back and forth at the birth of Heracles.<sup>55</sup> Dr. Archer Taylor raises the question whether, once the association with a woman is made, the characteristics of a woman are assigned to it. Along this line it is suggested

<sup>51</sup> *op. cit.* p. 186, n. 3: In Little Russia, on the day when the church celebrates the memory of the Maccabees, the poppy ('Mac' in Russian) is solemnly consecrated—a ceremony undoubtedly showing popular etymology.

<sup>52</sup> See p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> *Rh. Mus.* XLIV, 157.

<sup>54</sup> *Rh. Mus.* XLIX, 190.

<sup>55</sup> *Kl. Schr.* I, 76.



elsewhere in this discussion that it may have been regarded as a female animal.

In modern Greek folk-lore these tales of metamorphosis are very common. It is a common notion that the weasel was once a maid but was transformed into an animal. For this reason the weasel envies all maids and tries to destroy them.<sup>56</sup> Every device is resorted to in order to avert the jealous hate of the animal. In a room where the dowry of the daughter is kept they put for the weasel a vessel with honey and perfumes (the best known ἀποτρόπαια) and they entreat the weasel to take the gift and not carry off what is treasured up for the girl. Further, they appeal to it in terms like these: "We make you gold, all of gold and silver, we give you a man that you may be married, have your own house and be a housewife." When they meet the weasel, they say, "Good wishes, my dear weasel," (καλῶς τῇ νυφίτῃ μου). In the house they set up a spindle with yarn, since "it loved to spin when it was still a maid."<sup>57</sup>

In Sicily the custom of marrying the weasels prevails. Besides that, in order to keep them from killing the chickens they say, "If you are female, we give you the king's son; if you are male, we give you the queen's daughter."<sup>58</sup>

#### THE WEASEL AS A SOUL-ANIMAL

It is a common superstition among primitive peoples that the soul leaves the body and wanders about. The form it takes varies with different peoples but the way of egress is almost uniformly the nose or mouth. Naturally the stay of the soul in the body and its departure from it is associated with breathing.

<sup>56</sup> Πολίτης, Παραδόσεις No. 333: ἡ νυφίτῃς ἦτο νύφη καὶ ἔγενε ζῶν, γιὰ τοῦτο ζηλεῖται ὅσαι ταῖς νυφάδες cited by Klinger.

<sup>57</sup> Πολίτης, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Pitrè, *Usi e costumi* 3, 440-1: Si si'fimmina, ti dugnu lu figghiu di lu re; si si' masculu, ti dugnu la figghia di la riggina, cited by Klinger.

The Homeric Greeks believed that the soul left the body by the mouth.<sup>59</sup> Rohde, quoting Tylor, cites a parallel from the Seminoles of Florida: "Among the Seminoles of Florida, when a woman died in childbirth, the infant was held over her face to receive her parting spirit, and thus acquire strength and knowledge for its future use."<sup>60</sup> According to Democritus the soul leaves the body and in passing out is disseminated abroad.<sup>61</sup> According to Plato it is the breath, πνεῦμα.<sup>62</sup> Again he says it is winged and that its appearances are shadowy.<sup>63</sup> This is the nearest he comes to giving it defined form. Elsewhere he expresses the idea that the souls that are permitted to be re-incarnated in other bodies mingle with the wind and are breathed into new bodies.<sup>64</sup> In Herondas there is an interesting illustration of the belief: "Thrash this boy until his miserable soul is at his very lips."<sup>65</sup> The poets make the idea the medium of a pretty sentiment. Plato Comicus expresses it thus: "I kist Agathon and stayed his soul at his lips; for the poor thing came up as though with intent to issue."<sup>66</sup> From the Anthologia Palatine comes this: "The pressure of Europa's kiss brings up the soul from the toes and the finger-tips."<sup>67</sup> Tennyson's expression of the idea is familiar, "And our spirits rushed together at the meeting of the lips."<sup>68</sup>

The soul was thought of as leaving the body of the waking person when he yawned and of a sleeping person

<sup>59</sup> Homer, *Il.* IX, 409, cited by Rohde, *Psyche* I, 23, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, 391.

<sup>61</sup> Jambl. in Stob. *Eclog.* 384, 16 f. W., cited by Rohde, *Psyche* II, 190, 2.

<sup>62</sup> *Phaed.* 70 A; 77 B; 80 D.

<sup>63</sup> *Phaed.* 81, C D: ψυχὴ . . . ὥσπερ λέγεται, περὶ τὰ μνήματά τε καὶ τοὺς τάφους κυλινδομένη· περὶ δὲ δὴ καὶ ὥφθη ἅττα ψυχῶν σκιοειδῆ φαντάσματα.

<sup>64</sup> *Phaed.* 81 D.

<sup>65</sup> *Mim.* 3, 3: ἄχρῖς ἢ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ χειλέων μούνον ἢ κακὴ λειφθῇ.

<sup>66</sup> *Frag.* 1, Bergk p. 299; τὴν ψυχὴν Ἀγάθωνα φιλῶν ἐπὶ χεῖλεσιν ἔσχον· ἦλθε γὰρ ἢ τλήμων ὥς διαβησομένη.

<sup>67</sup> *A. P.* V, 14: ἀλλ' ἐρίσασα τὸ στόμα, τὴν ψυχὴν ἐξ ὀνύχων (ἀνάγει)

<sup>68</sup> This and the three preceding illustrations are taken from *Folk-Lore* V, 83.

when he snored or dreamed. To prevent its exit from the mouth of a yawning person those who stood by and were interested snapped the thumb and middle finger. It seems that besides preventing the escape of the soul this action also kept back evil spirits which would enter the body by the mouth.<sup>69</sup> Concerning the Hindu superstition about yawning Tavernier says, "Les Idolâtres des Indes ont cette coûtume que, quand quelqu'un baille, ils font claquer leurs doigts en criant par plusieurs fois Ginarami, c'est à dire, souviens-toi de Harami, qui passe parmi ces Idolâtres pour un grand-saint. Ils disent que ce claquement de doigts ne se fait que pour empescher que quelque mauvais esprit n'entre dans le corps de celuy qui baille."<sup>70</sup> A Scotch parallel to this adds the number of times which one must snap the fingers to accomplish the desired result: "When a man yawns it is very wrong not to snap the fingers three or seven times." The same illustration records the heroic measure of thrusting the whole hand into the mouth to prevent the soul's escape. Among the Germans it is a common superstition that the soul leaves the body of a person when he dreams.<sup>71</sup> In modern Greek folk-lore the idea occurs frequently.<sup>72</sup>

The forms which the soul takes as it leaves the body are quite varied. In Wales the belief is held that when witches die their souls pass out of their bodies in the shape of a great moth. Further, aged people used to say that white moths were the souls of the dead. When any kind of moth fluttered around a candle people said some one was dying and the soul was passing.<sup>73</sup> The Burmese conceive the soul as having the shape and appearance of a butterfly. It is called the *leyp-bya*. The *leyp-bya* leaves the body during sleep and

<sup>69</sup> Tylor, *op. cit.* 1, 97—104.

<sup>70</sup> *Voyage des Indes*, 1.3 ch. 14, cited in *Zeitschr. des Vereins f. Volksk.* XVII, 469.

<sup>71</sup> von der Leyen, *Archiv f. d. Studieren d. n. Spr.* 114, p. 1. n, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Πολίτης, *Μελέται περί τοῦ βίου καὶ τῆς γλώσσης τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ λαοῦ* A.B

<sup>73</sup> Trevelyan, *Folk-lore of Wales*, p. 207.



permanently at death. In sleep its departure is signalised by snoring, the notion being that a snore, when followed by soundless sleep, is the last sound made by the departing soul.<sup>74</sup> They believe it is extremely dangerous to awaken anybody suddenly for fear his *leyp-bya* may not have time to return.<sup>75</sup> Again it is thought of as escaping from the body in the form of a bee. The bee may enter a hole in a wall and be imprisoned accidentally or intentionally. The person whose soul is thus imprisoned cannot awake till the bee is released. Sometimes, too, the bee crosses a brook by a bridge made of the sword of an observer.<sup>76</sup> In a story from Gorsleben the animal is a mouse.<sup>77</sup> In the Germanic version of the story the passage back is closed by a board.<sup>78</sup> The maiden from whose mouth the mouse issued remains dead. In Celtic folk-lore the soul takes the form of a little man.<sup>79</sup> A Cardiganshire story also represents it as a lizard.<sup>80</sup>

It has already been noted that in Greek art the soul is represented as a woman.<sup>81</sup> Pliny also furnishes an example of this kind. He is speaking about Curtius Rufus; "*inclinato die spatiabatur in porticu; offertur ei mulieris figura, humana grandior pulchriorque.*"<sup>82</sup> In another passage of Pliny the soul appears in the form of a crow.<sup>83</sup>

Klinger in his discussion of the weasel as a soul animal counts among the attributes of the soul-animal that of avenger of broken oaths. He cites as illustration a passage

<sup>74</sup> A. E. Crawley, *The Idea of the Soul*, pp. 136, 216.

<sup>75</sup> *Journ. Amer. Folk-lore*, IV, 113.

<sup>76</sup> *Folk-lore Journal*, VI, 17; *Notes and Queries*, 1 ser. III, 206 *Choice Notes*, 269; *Germania*, V, 112.

<sup>77</sup> *Basset Rev. des trad. pop.* XIII, 667.

<sup>78</sup> *Basset, op. cit.* XVIII, 536, cf. Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* p. 167.

<sup>79</sup> See p. 45.

<sup>80</sup> Rhys, *Celtic Folk-lore*, p. 607.

<sup>81</sup> See p. 44.

<sup>82</sup> *Ep.* VII, 27, 2, cited by J. Weir, *De praestigiis daemonum* p. 68.

<sup>83</sup> *N. H.* 7, 52: *Aristeae etiam visam (animam) evolantem ex ore in Proconneso corvi effigie.*



from Heracleides Ponticus, which tells how the weasels punished Polemarchus for broken faith and drove him to destroy himself.<sup>84</sup> Liebrecht seems to go further in his interpretation of the passage.<sup>85</sup> He seems to be saying that the souls of those whom Polemarchus had betrayed returned in the shape of weasels, but he cites Grohmann to the effect that weasels "treten als Rächerinnen begangenen Frevels auf." Liebrechts interpretation seems to be justified, hence Klinger might have made more positive use of it to establish his theory of the early belief in the weasel as a soul-animal. A slightly different version of the part played by the weasel in avenging broken faith, but perhaps not really different in essence, is represented in a fable current among the ancient Jews. A girl once fell into a well. A youth passing by heard her cry for help. He offered to save her from death if she would promise to become his wife. After he had drawn her up from the well they swore eternal love to each other and, as witnesses to their vows, they named the well and also a weasel that was just running past. They then parted. The maiden remained true to her oath, but the youth soon afterward espoused another bride. The first son born of this union was bitten to death by a weasel. The second was drowned by falling into a well. The bereaved mother asked her husband what was the cause of these calamities. He, remembering the broken vow, related to his wife all that had happened. She, in terror, divorced her husband, and he returned to the former maiden and fulfilled his promise.<sup>86</sup>

In later folk-lore the weasel appears as a soul-animal in the story of King Guntram told by Paulus Diaconus.<sup>87</sup> According to this author's version of the story, however, a

<sup>84</sup> C. 39—Πολέμαρχος ἐπιорκήσας τὸν τῶν Κορινθίων στόλον καὶ μυθολογοῦσι ὅτε καθείδοι νύκτωρ, τὰς γαλαῖς δάκνειν αὐτόν. καὶ τέλος διαποροῦντα ἑαυτὸν ἀνελεῖν.

<sup>85</sup> *Zur Volkskunde* p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Placzec, *op. cit.* p. 159.

<sup>87</sup> *Historica* 3, 33 (The history of the Lombards written in the 9th Century).

snake has the rôle. Since it has all the elements that were usually associated with stories of the kind it is well to give a synopsis of it. King Guntramn had gone into the forest to hunt. When his followers were running about hither and thither, he remained behind with a trusty follower. Soon, overcome by sleep, he laid his head in the lap of his companion and went to sleep. As he slept, from his mouth came a little animal like a snake, which ran down to a little stream nearby and tried to cross. The king's companion then took his sword and laid it across the stream so that the snake crossed over. Having crossed, the snake entered a cavity in the mountain near, and then returned after a little, and crossing the river again on the sword re-entered the king's mouth.

King Guntramn then awoke and declared that he had had a wonderful dream. In his sleep he seemed to have crossed a river over an iron bridge and entered a mountain, where he beheld great abundance of gold. His companion then related to him what happened as he slept. The king then rose and with his companion went and discovered treasure in the mountain.<sup>88</sup>

In mediæval and later stories the soul frequently comes out in the form of a weasel.<sup>89</sup> In French folk-lore the story of King Guntramn is different in certain details. He dreams that he crosses a stream, finds a grotto where he sees the punishment of the wicked. The soldier who is watching sees his spirit come out in the form of a weasel.<sup>90</sup> Again the experience is related as that of a follower of Henri, Bishop of Rheims, with details similar to the other versions, except that the finding of treasure is omitted. The story comes from

<sup>88</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, p. 905 and Meyer, *Germanische Mythologie* p. 63. The latter gives the bibliography for the motive.

<sup>89</sup> Liebrecht, *Gervasius von Tilbury*, p. 114: quaedam alba bestiola in modum mustelae exisse—Cf. Wuttke, §60. *Rev. des trad. pop.* XXII.

<sup>90</sup> Van Elven, *La Tradition* V, 228.



'le chroniqueur Hélinand, originaire du Beauvoisis et mort en 1229.'<sup>91</sup> Other details are added in the story of Tyrius and Guido, the two friends who had gone to fight the infidels. Following the weasel they find not only treasure but a talisman to ensure victory over enemies: "Sie fandem einen todten Drachen, dessen Bauch ganz mit Gold gefüllt war, mit einem schon geschliffen Schwerte, auf welchem folgende Inschrift stand: durch dieses Schwert wird der Ritter Guido den Feind des Tyrius überwinden."<sup>92</sup>

Not only does the soul of a living being appear in the form of a weasel; the soul of the dead also appears. In Normandy the ermine, an animal of the weasel family, is considered to be the soul of a baby dead before baptism.<sup>93</sup> And this belief is not only European, but is held in other parts of the world, a fact which would indicate that the tradition in Europe is not one that is borrowed from ancient belief. The Mexican *Taskans* (priests, in old Mexican) believed that the souls of famous people lived after death in the form of beautiful singing birds. The souls of simple people in the form of weasels.<sup>94</sup>

As the notion of the weasel as a soul-animal fades out in superstition it comes to be regarded as a demon usually of a dangerous character. Such are the 'gola' among the *Wend*. These 'gola' are spirits in the form of weasels that devour dead bodies.<sup>95</sup> A further development also are the mythological tales of metamorphoses. Klinger cites the Breton tale

<sup>91</sup> Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen*, no. 455.

<sup>92</sup> *Gesta Romanorum* ed. Oesterly, no. 172. See the appendix for the bibliography. Cf. also O. Tobler, *Die Epiphanie der Seele*, Kiel, 1911, p. 19 §4. Following Grimm II, 142 (*Der schlafende Landsknecht nach Vincent. Bellov. Spec. Nat.* 2, 108) he gives the ancient tale of the soul leaving the mouth. Cf. again J. W. Wolf, *Hess. Sag.* for the modern parallel.

<sup>93</sup> *Rev. des trad. pop.* XV, 639.

<sup>94</sup> J. G. Müller ascribes this belief to the *Taskaltets* not the *Taskans*. See Klinger, *op. cit.* p. 187, n. 5.

<sup>95</sup> Veckenstedt, *Wend. Sag. March. u. Gebrauch*, S. 354 No. 4 (cited by Klinger).



of the magician who wins youth by charms and in order to preserve the secret, turns all his assistants into animals. His wife is changed into a weasel, his lackeys into frogs, the maid into a snake.<sup>96</sup> Similar tales from modern Greek folk-lore have already been cited.<sup>97</sup>

#### THE WEASEL AS AN ANIMAL OF ILL OMEN

In keeping with the superstition that makes the weasel a soul-animal is the fact that its appearance in the midst of men or its chance meeting with one was looked upon as an ill omen. This superstition also seems to be ancient and widespread. Pythagoras is quoted as saying, "If a weasel cross your path, turn back."<sup>98</sup> In a treatise called *οἰκοσκοπικὸν οἰώνισμα*, written by Xenocrates, a treatise that seems to have dealt in a more or less thorough-going way with all the superstitions associated with domestic animals and domestic acts, it is recorded that if a weasel or a snake appeared on the roof it was an ill omen.<sup>99</sup> Commenting on the probable character of such a treatise, Lawson observes that it was in all likelihood a collection of occurrences with possible explanations, it being extremely unlikely that such heterogeneous material could be reduced to any scientific system with any degree of probability.<sup>100</sup>

The appearance of a weasel in the midst of an assembly in ancient times in Greece was a signal for the breaking up of the assembly.<sup>101</sup> Aristophanes makes fun of the superstition.<sup>102</sup> Blaydes' note on this passage of Aristophanes cites Theophrastus, *Characters* 25, *Περὶ Δεισιδαιμονίας*, "If a

<sup>96</sup> Luzel, *Contes pop. de la Basse-Bretagne*, vol. II; 'Le magician et son valet.'

<sup>97</sup> See p. 47.

<sup>98</sup> *Frag. Phil. Graec.* ed. Mullach 1, 5, 10, cited by Frazer, *Folk-lore* 1, 156, n. 8.

<sup>99</sup> Suidas, sub voc. Zenocrates: *Συνεγράψατο τὸ οἰκοσκοπικὸν οἰώνισμα· οἶον, εἰ ἐν τῇ στέγῃ ἐφάνη γαλῇ ἢ ὄφει, τὸ δὲ τί σημαίνει*: Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, p. 949.

<sup>100</sup> *Modern Greek Folk-lore*, p. 327.

<sup>101</sup> Suidas *σύμβολα α.*

<sup>102</sup> *Eccles*, 792, *σεισμός εἰ γένοιτο πολλάκις ἢ πῦρ ἀπότροπον, ἢ διάξειεν γαλῇ παύσαιντ' εἰσφέροντες.*

weasel run across his path he will not pursue his walk until some one else has traversed the road or until he has thrown three stones across it."<sup>103</sup> The same note cites a passage from Plautus where the weasel appears as a good omen and from Terence where the meeting of a black dog is of ill omen.<sup>104</sup> Further, it cites in comparison a proverb from Diogenianus, γαλῆν ἔχεις, and explains the proverb to mean the possession of something of ill omen.<sup>105</sup>

There are two interesting features in the superstition cited by Theophrastus; first, that the evil forboded by the weasel may be turned upon some one else by allowing him to pass on the road first, or upon the weasel itself, by throwing stones at it; secondly, that the religious number three is used. In other versions of the superstition the number is sometimes seven, and later religious signs or formulae of speech are used to break the spell.<sup>106</sup> On the turning of the evil from oneself Jebb's note to the Theophrastus passage is of interest. "It was the old belief," he says, "that the evil portended by omens was not aimed at any particular person, and that, therefore, it could be turned off from oneself by precaution or (so to say) by a vigorous protest." Then he cites from Dio Chrysostomus the story of the Phrygian who, seeing a raven and taking it as an ill omen and attempting to avert it by casting a stone at it, was deceived and came to grief from his failure to break the bad spell.<sup>107</sup>

The weasel appears among terrible omens cited by Apuleius. A hen lays a full-fledged chicken. As a company are at table the ground opens up and a stream of blood rises

<sup>103</sup> καὶ τὴν ὁδὸν ἐὰν παραδράμῃ γαλῆ, μὴ πρότερον πορευθῆναι ἕως ἂν διεξέλθῃ τις ἢ λίθους τρεῖς ὑπὲρ τῆς ὁδοῦ διαβάλλῃ.

<sup>104</sup> *Stich.* 3, 2, 7: *Phorm.* 4, 4, 30.

<sup>105</sup> 3, 84: See also Boehm, in *Zeitschr. d. Ver. f. Volks.* XXV pp. 23 f., and Wuttke, *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube der Gegenwart*, p. 170: schon das blosse Ansehen (des Wiesels) macht blind oder krank (in Bohemia).

<sup>106</sup> See pp. 57, 58.

<sup>107</sup> Dio Chrysost. *Or.* 24.



and sprinkles the table. The wine in the casks is reported to be boiling as if being heated. Amid these portents a weasel is seen dragging a snake into the house.<sup>108</sup>

In the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 66 a, mention is made of those who regard the meeting of the weasel as an omen. It is pronounced unlawful to regard it as giving oracles.<sup>109</sup>

One disregarded the omen at his peril. The portent that foretold disaster to Sejanus is described in the story told by Dio Cassius: "One morning, the first of the month, when all were gathered at Sejanus' house, the couch placed in the small room where he received broke into infinitesimal fragments under the weight of the throng seated upon it; and, as he was leaving the house, a weasel darted through the midst of them."<sup>110</sup> But the likelihood of the disregard of a superstition was not so great among ancient peoples as of the excessive regard. Ammianus Marcellinus tells that in Rome the consulting of an expert upon the meeting of a weasel was punished by death.<sup>111</sup>

The weasel seen in a dream betokens death among other things.<sup>112</sup> This idea arises out of the notion that it is an ill omen to meet a weasel.<sup>113</sup>

In modern folk-lore almost uniformly the weasel is an animal of ill omen, though occasionally it betokens good. In Bohemia the sight of it is unlucky. In Germany a weasel on the roof means ill fortune. In Norway it ensures good

<sup>108</sup> *Met.* 9, 34: visa est interea mustela etiam mortuum serpentem forinsecus mordicus adtrahens.

<sup>109</sup> Lewy, *Zeitschr. d. Ver. f. Volkskunde*, III, 135, cf. *id.* XXIII, 385: If a Japanese meets a weasel on the road he takes it as a sign of fire.

<sup>110</sup> 58, 5, Προϊόντος αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας, γαλῇ διὰ μέσων σφῶν διῆξεν.

<sup>111</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 16, 8, 2: si quis super occentu soricis vel occursu mustelae . . . consulisset quemquam peritum.

<sup>112</sup> Artemidorus, *Onirocr.* 3, 28: γαλῇ γυναῖκα σημαίνει πανούργον καὶ κακότροπον . . . καὶ θάνατον· ὅτι γὰρ ἂν λάβῃ, τοῦτο σήπει.

<sup>113</sup> Riess, *Rh. Mus.* XLIX, 190.



luck for the house.<sup>114</sup> In France very generally it forebodes ill and its presence is a plague. Rolland has gathered many sayings to illustrate this from many authors and from his own researches.<sup>115</sup> A few examples are cited.

First the weasel is an omen of death. "Une belette qui croise la porte d'un malade, c'est un présage de mort."<sup>116</sup> "Une belette qui traverse le chemin devant vous présage une mort inattendue."<sup>117</sup> "Qui voit une belette doit mourir dans l'année."<sup>118</sup> "En allant en Italie, une belette me traversa le chemin, ce qui m' a toujours été un présage funeste."<sup>119</sup> "Une petite ermine qu' on appelle bacole leur passe entre les jambes; voilà un mauvais présage."<sup>120</sup>

Sometimes the evil portended may be averted: "La belette passant devant quelqu'un lui porte malheur. On a soin, quand on le peut, de tuer ces animaux et de les suspendre à des bouleaux dans la forêt." One may avert the evil spell by throwing a stone: "Être traversé par une belette porte malheur. Pour le conjurer, il faut attendre qu' une personne ou un animal passent avant vous ou, à défaut, jeter une pierre sur laquelle s'acharne le maléfice." Three stones are better: "Quand une belette traverse le chemin devant vous, il faut aller à reculons et pousser trois pierres. Si vous ne le faites pas, il vous arrivera malheur." The sign of the cross may avert the evil: "Si une belette traverse devant vous, faites une croix sur son passage: sinon, vous êtes assuré de perdre votre couteau ou votre mouchoire."

A common way, however, of counteracting the evil spell is to address the weasel not by its own name but in coaxing

<sup>114</sup> Keller *op. cit.* p. 171.

<sup>115</sup> *Faune Populaire* Vols. I and VII

<sup>116</sup> Rolland, *op. cit.* I, 50: The source of the saying is given in each case. Cp.

Artemidorus *cit. supr.*

<sup>117</sup> Rolland, *op. cit.* VII, 123.

<sup>118</sup> From Cap Sizan (Basse-Bretagne) Le Braz, *Leg. de la mort.* p. 4.

<sup>119</sup> *Mem. de Campion*, 1653, ed. de 1807, p. 338.

<sup>120</sup> Rolland, *op. cit.* VII, 123.

and flattering terms. Rolland cites several examples illustrating the practice.

Sometimes, however, the weasel is considered an animal of good omen: "Une belette qui traverse devant une personne lui porte bonheur. Il faut se garder de tuer une belette. Ce serait de mauvais augure." Again the manner of its meeting or passing determines the character of the fortune that follows: "Si le putois traverse le chemin devant vous, présage de malheur: mais s'il traverse en formant une croix, présage d'une fortune dans l'année."

It is a prophet of rain: "Quand on voit coufir les belettes le long des chemins ou des haies, elles annoncent la pluie ou l'orage."<sup>121</sup>

#### THE WEASEL IN PROVERBS

Not only was the weasel looked upon as an animal of ill omen, but to it were attributed also characteristics of the most baneful kind. A few good qualities were, however, ascribed to it, as, for instance, its character as a protector of treasure, but for the most part its attributes were evil. This is illustrated in the proverbs associated with it that were in ancient times and still are current.

How much proverbial lore lies back of the passage of Artemidorus already cited is impossible to say.<sup>122</sup> Unquestionably a good deal. Evidently the superstition that made the weasel signify a bad woman was widely held. It seems to be familiar, for Artemidorus makes no explanation of it. He finds it necessary however, to explain *δίκη* and *ἐργασία* and *ὠφέλεια*. The explanation of the last two terms is noted by many commentators, but none have thought it worth while to explain *δίκη*, at least, to comment on Artemidorus' explanation of it. That the weasel signified judgment was

<sup>121</sup> Cp. Ael. N. A. 7,8.

<sup>122</sup> *Onirocr.* 3, 28: Γαλή γυναῖκα σημαίνει πανούργον καὶ κακότροπον καὶ δίκην· ἔστι γὰρ ἰσόψηφος δίκη καὶ γαλή· καὶ θάνατον. καὶ ἐργασίας καὶ ὠφελείας. καλεῖται γὰρ πρὸς τινῶν κερδῶ.



quite a general belief, but the explanation of its signification by the fact that the words are numerical equivalents seems rather strange. The numerical value is 42. Is it because the number is equal to 2 ( $3 \times 7$ ) that Artemidorus thought it worth while suggesting an explanation? Yet he seems to say at the end of the passage that these different ideas are explicable from the actions of the animal.

From Aristophanes came two proverbs. One originates in the observance of the habits of the weasel as a house animal:

κατέκειτο δ' αὐτὴν ἐντυλίξας ἡσυχῇ  
ὑπὸ τοῦ δέους βδέουσα δριμύτερον γαλῆς.<sup>123</sup>

The other was used of a person who had lost his voice, γαλῆν κατεπεπώκει.<sup>124</sup> How the weasel came to be associated with the losing of the voice is not very evident. Plutarch says that the weasel was worshipped by many as the symbol of speech because it conceived by the ears and gave birth by the mouth.<sup>125</sup> It may be that the idea was extended and that it was believed to take away speech or give it. As a demonic creature it could do so.

There is some dispute among commentators as to whether the line in Theocritus 15 is really a proverb: αἱ γαλαῖαι μαλακῶς χρῆσθοντι καθεύδειν. Kiessling is of the opinion that it is not. It is true that γαλῆ was used to mean woman.<sup>126</sup> Probably women were called 'weasels' as a reproach, just as they are sometimes today called 'cats.' Even if that were so, there is no adequate reason to suppose that the sentence is not a proverb. Parallels to this proverb are found in modern folk-lore. Rolland cites as a common French saying,

<sup>123</sup> *Plut.* 692-3.

<sup>124</sup> ἐπὶ τινος νέου μὴ δυναμένου φθέγξασθαι *Arist. Frag.* 168 (Blaydes) cp. Phrynich. p. 31, 27 (Bekker).

<sup>125</sup> *Isis*, 74.

<sup>126</sup> See Blaydes on *Arist. Eccles* 128 and on *Ach.* 255.



"Paresseux comme une loutre."<sup>127</sup> Another version of the same proverb is from Haute-Garonne, "Fignan coumo uno louy'ro."<sup>128</sup> Another slightly different version comes from Carcassonne, "La fay' no fa la tay' no,"="la fouine engendre la langueur."<sup>129</sup>

One of the most common of the weasel proverbs is that which comes from Diogenianus, γαλῆ χιτῶν.<sup>130</sup> Suidas says it is the same in meaning as, οὐ πρέπει γαλῆ κροκωτός. Erasmus explains the proverb thus: dici solitum quotiens honos additur indignis, et quos haudquaquam decet; aut quum datum quippiam eis qui munere non norunt uti.<sup>131</sup> It undoubtedly goes back to the fable of the weasel which by the grace of Aphrodite was changed into a beautiful woman so that she might secure the love of a youth, and was dressed handsomely, but which quickly showed its nature when at the marriage feast it saw a mouse. Closely akin to this proverb, no doubt, is the line from Maximus Planudes:

νύμφη νύμφη ἦν, κακείνη ἦν γαλῆ.<sup>132</sup>

Crusius is of the opinion that rhyme and assonance argue that this may have been a children's song based on the myth of metamorphosis cited above.

Another familiar fable preserved by Diogenianus appears in the form γαλῆν ἔχεις.<sup>133</sup> Crusius completes the proverb by adding τῶν ὀνύχων. In this he seems to be wrong. It would appear that this was added later as an explanation of the evil connotation of the proverb. One might draw the comparison of holding a cat by the claws. Our own proverb,

<sup>127</sup> *op. cit.* VII, 129.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> III, 82.

<sup>131</sup> *Chil.* 1, 2, 72 p. 78.

<sup>132</sup> See Crusius, *Rh. Mus.* XLII, 404 ff.

<sup>133</sup> 3, 84. Strattis, Kock. fr. 71. Zenobius, 2, 93. Plut. *Prov.* 101.

"You have the wrong sow by the ears," would be similar. The explanation of the paroemiographer seems correct, "applied to things that miscarry."<sup>134</sup> Erasmus again gives an explanation: "γαλῆν ἔχεις. Id est, 'mustelam habes.' In eum quadrat cui omnia sunt inauspicata, tamquam fati ac diis iratis, ut aiunt . . . ut non admodum dissideat ab illis, Equum habet Seianum, et, Aurum habet Tolosanum."<sup>135</sup> He goes on to point out that in Britain when the hunt was starting it was an ill omen even to mention the name of the weasel.

Another from Diogenianus, γαλῆ στέαρ, is thus explained by Erasmus: 'mustelae pingue': subaudiendum, das, aut committis—velutsi quis laudaret laudis avidissimum.<sup>136</sup>

The proverb ποῖ ποῖ γαλῆν ὀρῶ seems to make of the weasel an animal of good omen. The story of its origin is that the actor Hegelochus, when acting the Orestes of Euripides was understood by the audience to say γαλῆν for γαληνά (with elided á) in the line:

ἐκ κυμάτων γε αὔθις αὖ γαλῆν' ὀρῶ.<sup>137</sup>

In Brittany as in Norway weasels bring good fortune to the house.

Crusius in the article cited gives another from Maximus Planudes: ἐκράτησας τὴν γαλῆν τῶν ὀνύχων. This can hardly be an ancient proverb. Kurtz compares the modern Greek proverb: πιάνει τὴν γάτ' ἀπὸ τὰ νύχια.<sup>138</sup>

The ill temper of the weasel is illustrated by a few modern proverbs. A common French saying is, "Colereux comme un putois."<sup>139</sup> Shakespeare has a few references to it, "The weasel hath not such a deal of spleen as you are tossed

<sup>134</sup> ἐπὶ τῶν ἀποτευκτικῶν. παρόσον οἱ γαλῆν ἔχοντες οὐκ εὐτυχοῦσι. cf. Apostolius 426.

<sup>135</sup> *op. cit.* p. 78.

<sup>136</sup> *op. cit.* 1, 4, 11.

<sup>137</sup> *Adagiorum Junii Centuria Quinta.*

<sup>138</sup> See p. 60.

<sup>139</sup> Rolland *op. cit.* VII, 130.

with." Another comes from *Cymbeline*, "As quarrelous as the weasel."<sup>140</sup>

Its lustful character is illustrated by a common French proverb, "Si une fois une fille a fait l'amour, j'aimerais mieux garder un pré rempli de belettes," and by the saying, "Mourir du mal de la furette," which is equivalent to, "mourir du mal d'amour," that is of "privation d'amour."<sup>141</sup>

To be "ugly as a weasel," "être laid comme un fouin" or, "avoir une mine de chat-fouin," are common French expressions. Trickiness is defined by two proverbs, "Malin, rusé comme un fussiò'," a proverb which comes from Valenciennes, and "Malin comme un fichèou." From Villelongue comes the saying about a crafty young girl, "Fine comme la panquèze."

The weasel also guards treasure, "Là ou une fouine fait son nid elle ne fait pas de dégats." Very general is the saying, "Là ou le putois demeure il ne fait de dégats afin de ne pas dénoncer sa presence."

Shakespeare refers to the weasel's propensity for sucking eggs, "I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs."<sup>142</sup> Her habit of prowling about at night is noticed thus, "Night-wandering weasels shriek to see him there."<sup>143</sup>

#### THE WEASEL FINDS THE HERB OF LIFE

In modern folk-lore the belief is widespread that the weasel knows the herb of life and with it restores the sick among the young of its kind and even brings back the dead to life. How early this belief in the weasel's power began is not quite clear. No examples from ancient sources may be cited to substantiate the theory that it existed in very early

<sup>140</sup> *King Henry IV* pt. 1, sc. 3. *Cymbeline*, iii, 4. The Shakespeare quotations are furnished by Dr. Richard Jente, Washington University.

<sup>141</sup> Rolland *op. cit.* VII, 147.

<sup>142</sup> *As you like it*, ii, 5.

<sup>143</sup> *Lucrece*, 44.



times, but, if it be rightly assumed that in very early times the weasel was regarded as a demoniac creature, it is altogether likely that this belief also, which is common in modern folk-lore, was very early associated with it.

In the stories that are extant concerning the finding of the herb of life other animals appear frequently, the serpent the most frequently. Sometimes it is the fish, sometimes the hare, and, in later versions of the tradition, a bird. Occasionally, too, the object that heals or restores to life is other than a plant. In the Talmud it is a precious stone.<sup>144</sup> The account of the herb of life first appears in the story of Glaucus, a story which according to Pausanias is at least as old as Pindar and Aeschylus. Pausanias declares that Pindar sang the story of Glaucus and Aeschylus made it the subject of a drama, *Γλαῦκος Πόντιος*.<sup>145</sup>

The story of Glaucus and the healing herb appears in three versions. The most common was that Glaucus, a fisherman, ate of the herb and, becoming mad from its magic properties, jumped into the sea. He became a deity of the sea and prophesied to men generally but to mariners in particular. His discovery of the herb was brought about by chance. He had caught some fish and laid them down on the grass. The contact of the fish with an herb brought them back to life and they sprang forthwith into the sea.<sup>146</sup>

A second story tells how Glaucus was chasing a hare on Mount Oria in Aetolia. The hare fainted and Glaucus caught it and carried it to a spring. Here he plucked a wisp of grass which grew beside the spring and rubbed the hare with it. The animal at once revived. Glaucus perceived the virtue of the grass, ate of it, became inspired and, a storm coming

<sup>144</sup> Hertz, *Spielmannsbuch* p. 408.

<sup>145</sup> Frag. 263: Paus. 9,22, 7.

<sup>146</sup> Ov. *M.* XIII, 924: Serv. on Virg. *G.* 1, 437: Tzetzes, *Schol. Lycophr.* 754: Schol. Ap. Rh. I, 1310. The passages are cited by Fraser in his note on Pausanias, *loc. cit.* See also Rohde, *Der gr. Rom.* p. 126 n.

on, flung himself into the sea. The taste of the grass was also said to have made him immortal.<sup>147</sup> The herb, according to tradition, grew originally in the Islands of the Blest.<sup>148</sup> For this version of the story Athenaeus is the authority who says that Nicander gave it.<sup>149</sup>

The third version of the story seems to have been more widely circulated than the others. Indeed Rohde is of the opinion that its high antiquity is proven by the fact that it is so widespread.<sup>150</sup> As a child Glaucus was chasing a butterfly and, in doing so, fell into a jar of honey and was drowned. His father Minos was determined that he be restored to life and put upon the seer Polyidus the task of effecting his restoration. Polyidus was perplexed what means to employ until he saw a dead serpent brought to life by another serpent which brought an herb and laid it upon its body. Polyidus secured the herb and, laying it upon the body of the child Glaucus, brought him back to life.<sup>151</sup>

In this form, according to Welcker, the story was used by Sophocles and Euripides.<sup>152</sup> The only modification is that with them Asclepius and not Polyidus restores Glaucus. This fact, Hertz maintains, is signified by the two snakes upon the staff of the god.<sup>153</sup> It appears in the works of later authors, Apollodorus,<sup>154</sup> and Hyginus.<sup>155</sup> Palaephatus later added the detail that Polyidus learned of the herb from a physician Draco, which seems to be an attempt to make the story more rational.<sup>156</sup> An interesting adaptation of the

<sup>147</sup> Athenae. VI, p. 296, cited by Fraser, *loc. cit.*

<sup>148</sup> Servius, *loc. cit.* Alexander Aetol. 'Αλιεῖς.

<sup>149</sup> 297 A.

<sup>150</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>151</sup> Fraser, *loc. cit.* Fraser gives a partial bibliography for modern versions of the story and cites Rohde.

<sup>152</sup> *Griech. Trag.* 767 ff.

<sup>153</sup> *op. cit.* p. 407.

<sup>154</sup> III, 3, 1.

<sup>155</sup> *Fab.* 136.

<sup>156</sup> *Incredibilia*, c. 27. Cf. Agatharcides 1, 7.



story is made by Xanthus the historian. He tells that the Lydian King Tylo was, according to a Lydian tradition, restored to life by an herb called 'balis,' after it was seen from the restoration of one serpent by another that the plant had the power of restoring life.<sup>157</sup> Quintius Curtius also tells the story of Alexander the Great that once, as he slept beside the wounded Ptolemy a snake appeared to him in a dream which gave him a herb that cured Ptolemy.<sup>158</sup>

In the romance of Eliduc by Marie de France a weasel appears as the animal which finds the herb of life.<sup>159</sup> The weasel finds its mate slain and runs and gets a healing herb, puts it into the mouth of the dead weasel and restores it to life. The herb is found and is used to restore the princess to life, by being put in her lips. The use of a saffron flower to restore her young to life is customary on the part of the weasel, according to Hertz, who cites Gerald de Barri and Alexander Neckam.<sup>160</sup> A Macedonian tale gave to an herb the power of making men heroes.<sup>161</sup>

A Byzantine romance of the twelfth century, the Rhodanthe and Dosicles of Theodorus Prodromus, gives a slightly different turn to the motif. Here the herb is found by a she-bear. Myrilla had drugged her rival Rhodanthe into unconsciousness. When hunting the maiden's lover Dosicles discovered a she-bear reviving a bear that had fainted and, following its example, restored Rhodanthe.<sup>162</sup>

In modern folk-lore belief in Europe additions are made to the part that the weasel plays. If it sees its young or

<sup>157</sup> Plin. *N. H.* XXV. 24. See Rohde, *Der gr. Rom.* p. 126 n., where a bibliography for the modern use of the motif is given.

<sup>158</sup> *De gestis Alex. Magn.* IX, 8, 26: Diod. XVII, 103. Hertz, *op. cit.* p. 407.

<sup>159</sup> P. Sébillot, *Le Folk-lore de France* III, 529. Marie de France, *Poesies*, ed. Roquefort, 1, 475, cited by Fraser, and Hertz; also by Bolte-Polivka, *Märchen-Anmerkungen*, 1, 128.

<sup>160</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 409.

<sup>161</sup> Dietrich, *Zeitschr d. Ver. f. Volksk.* XV, a review of Παπαδόπουλος A and B.

<sup>162</sup> Rohde, *op. cit.* p. 529 n. 2.



another weasel ill, it brings the herb, buries it in the ground, blows its breath over it and urinates on it, in order to unite its strength with that of the plant. Then it pulls up the plant and puts it into the mouth of the dead weasel and restores it to life. The urine and breath of the weasel alone give it the healing power.<sup>163</sup> Here an attempt is made to introduce common sense.

<sup>163</sup> Kronfeld und Hovorka, *Vergleichende Volksmedizin* I, 451.